

The World Inside Out

by SAMUEL H. MOFFETT

I'M not sure that "The World Inside Out" is quite how I should have phrased my subject. Wouldn't it be more biblical to say "The World Upside Down?" Then I could begin with Acts: "These that have turned the world upside down are come here also," as the Thessalonians said when the Christians fell upon them preaching. And wouldn't "The World Upside Down" be more relevant? The charge the Thessalonians hurled against those Christians was that they were not obeying Caesar, and that has a contemporary ring to it, doesn't it, in these days of struggle for human rights. But I think I will stand my ground with "The World Inside Out," not "upside down." If it fails to catch the spirit of the age, I can at least console myself with a remark of Dean Inge: "The man who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower."

"Inside out" and "upside down" suggest two different patterns of Christian approach to the world. "Upside down" is more radical, often violent, and confrontational in an adversary relationship. "Inside out" is more subtle, pervasive, and closer perhaps to reform than revolution, though that particular

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distinction is more popular than precise. "Upside down" seems to have a proof text on its side, and the right revolutionary aura about it, but "inside out," I think, is better.

I. Not Upside Down

In the first place, the times have changed and "upside down" is already becoming a widower. Back in the wild sixties we were much taken with the idea of the Christian mission as a turning of the world upside down. We interpreted it as putting things radically right in a world that had put them radically wrong. We were going to drive the money-changers out of the temple, clap the oppressors in jail, and squeeze a fair deal for the poor out of the system even if it meant blowing up the system. We read the early history of the church as just that kind of a revolution, which boiled to a glorious climax when it captured the throne of the Caesars. Church against empire; and the Christians won!

I still believe that putting things right is a Christian responsibility. God's salvation is a salvation to righteousness and justice in this life as well as the next, and I would be saddened if I

thought we had lost our commitment to these goals. But we are re-thinking our methods. Now in the milder seventies even the radicals, looking back, have their doubts about upside-down revolution. Sol Alinsky's current *Manual for Radicals* tells his disciples to cool down and stop shouting about burning the system. "You have to begin from inside the system," he tells them. "Revolution without a foundation of prior reform and popular acceptance is doomed to fail." And he quotes with approval from old John Adams in a revolution that succeeded better than most, "The revolution was effected before the war commenced. . . . The revolution was in the hearts and minds of the people." That's inside out, not upside down.

In the second place, "inside out" is more biblical. "Turning the world upside down" was how their *enemies* described the Christians' mission. The Christians themselves didn't think of it that way at all. They were not that kind of revolutionist, not even that kind of liberator. When they thought things were wrong they said so, but they leaned over backwards trying insofar as they conscientiously could to obey Caesar, not defy him.

I cannot take very seriously the enthusiastic revisionists who read their own pre-fabricated Marxist versions of history into the gospels: Jesus the great revolutionist. Even the much more appealing theology of liberation leaves me uneasy (as do all one-note theologies) when it moves beyond the safety of the truth that God wants all men to be free to political and economic conclusions about the nature of man's freedom under God, and then goes on to advocate power strategies to achieve such freedoms. A great deal of it makes Christian

sense. But didn't Jesus resist the temptation to seize that kind of power? The temptation of the devil, the gospels call it. And didn't he say, "My kingdom is not of this world"? It's a sticky problem and always has been to know just where He drew the line between His "kingdom" and "this world," but the Christian does have to draw just such a line or he will end up with the mobs, not the Church; with Barabbas the Liberator, rather than with Jesus Christ the Suffering Servant.

Admittedly, the world usually does need a good shaking, but turning it upside down may not be the best Christian answer. If all you do is turn the world upside down, power from the bottom corrupts as surely as power at the top. In a few years it's as if the world hadn't been turned upside down at all. Nothing is so tragic as a revolution that fails; and so disappointing as one that succeeds.

I've lived most of my life in the revolution zone. About every ten years I've had a new revolution thrown at me. I was born only a few hundred miles from the Russian border and was barely a year old when *that* revolution "brought in the Kingdom." Now, a generation later its new utopia looks less and less like the Kingdom and more and more like the old Empire. The great revolution of our time, of course, is China. I was in that one too—teaching at Yenching University when Chu Teh, the Red Napoleon, swept down out of Manchuria across the North China plains and took Peking. Today a good many idealists, disillusioned with the Russian revolution, have been tempted to hope again and to pin their hopes to this new Chinese turning of the world upside down. Some of the

success stories that come out of China are true. The London *Economist*, in its new Asian survey, lists six countries which have broken through out of the dismal welter of economic failures that pockmark the face of Asia. One is Communist China. But before we hold up the People's Republic as a "mirror and model for the world," it might be well to remember that all the other five successful Asian economies are capitalist roaders: MacArthur's Japan (that's how the *Economist* gives the credit), Chiang Kai-shek's Taiwan, Park Chung-Hee's South Korea, colonial Hong Kong, and rightist Singapore. And the survey deflatingly adds that China's success seems to have been achieved "through the usual Maoist process of outrageous historical mistake." (*Economist*, May 7-13, 1977, pp. 10-11.) So before we join Professor Needham of Cambridge in a chorus of praise to Mao Tse-tung as "a Christ-like figure" gently leading the masses to freedom, it might be wise to wait to see whether, before long, a Chinese Solzhenitsyn may not emerge to tell us that as Stalin was worse than the Czar, so Mao was worse than Chiang Kai-shek. Already his wife is numbered with the transgressors. How soon the Revolution disappoints even the faithful. "The God that failed," said Koestler, a long time ago.

Long before Koestler, an even wiser man wrote, "Let me show you a more excellent way." Paul was not writing about revolutions, but his words fit many contexts.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. . . . And though I give all my goods to feed the poor;

and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing. . . ."

The familiar words are part of a warning against over-emphasis on the outer manifestations, the physical side, of the Christian's work and worship. Paul doesn't say that speaking in tongues is wrong. It's good, he says. A real gift of the Spirit. But he goes on to point out that this is true only when (1) it comes from the *Holy Spirit* (I Cor. 12:2, 3); (2) when it is not demanded from all Christians as the distinguishing mark of the believer (I Cor. 12:4-31); (3) when it is linked with a clear and understandable proclamation of God's word, not just the speaker's opinion (I Cor. 14:20-23); (4) when it is motivated by love (I Cor. chapter 13); (5) when it employs fitting and proper procedures (I Cor. 14:26-33).

I wonder if Paul might not have said much the same thing about Christians and revolution. I do not think he would say Christian radicalism is wrong, even when it seems to be trying to turn the world upside down. Good, and sometimes necessary, he might well say. *But* . . . But only when it is led by the Holy Spirit; when it is not demanded from all Christians in the same fixed patterns; when it is motivated by love, not politics; when it clearly proclaims God's judgment on all human systems, not specially selected ones; and when it employs fitting and proper procedures. The end does not justify the means.

And Paul would add, I think, "But let me show you a better way." Perhaps he would say: when the world upside down doesn't work—and it usually doesn't—try turning it inside out.

II. Inside Out

I do not think I am distorting the gospel record when I suggest that "turning the world inside out" is a better way of describing the way of the gospel—the mission and methods of Jesus—than "turning the world upside down."

Jesus began small and slow. He began with evangelism. He took fishermen and made them fishers of men. He changed people on the inside with faith instead of trying to carve the world outside to his shape with a sword. "Put up your sword, Peter," He said. He began with Christian discipling. He took a handful of ambitious, quarrelsome men and an unpromising group of women and trained them as disciples, not freedom-fighters. He molded them by word and example from the inside, not by radicalizing them or social legislation from the outside.

I know how disappointingly that seems to strip the gospel of a trumpet call to action. His first disciples didn't like it either. But how often the big-picture revolution fades, while the real revolutions, the power-releasing explosions, begin on the inside with a change at the core.

There's the atom, deep inside the matrix of matter, but for good or ill irrevocably changing the world in which we are going to live. Only astrologers and fortune-tellers think that it's the stars outside that affect the future. And there's the DNA revolution. Again, a small, mild beginning. This was its manifesto; a little statement of only 900 words hastily typed out by Crick and Watson at Cambridge early in 1953:

"We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid

(DNA). This structure has novel features which are of considerable biological interest. . . ."

(*The Double Helix* by J. Watson)

What a typical English understatement. They had found the shape of that "most golden of all molecules," as Watson described it later, the controlling particles of biological life in the human genes, not protein molecules as were generally thought, but DNA which has the unique ability to transmit life-shaping bacterial cells, one to another, thus determining the form of the living matter being produced. Looking at their strange little crystals, shaped like a double helix, twisting like spiral staircases, they exultantly believed that they had discovered "the Rosetta Stone for unraveling the true secret of life."

What they had actually done—and this is no reflection on the importance of their discovery—was simply to peel away another layer of the mystery that still hides the real secret of life. Perhaps it was an uneasy awareness of greater mysteries and greater inner forces eluding him that made Francis Crick, one of the original architects of the DNA revolution, so violently anti-Christian. He is a strange, abrasive man, not the most popular figure on the university scene. James Watson, his co-discoverer of DNA begins his book, *The Double Helix*, with the sentence, "I have never seen Francis Crick in a modest mood." When it was proposed to build a chapel at his college, Churchill (one of the newer Cambridge colleges), Crick exploded in anger. "If you ever put a chapel in at Churchill, I'll resign," he said. But they did. And he did. Now he's a little embarrassed about his outburst, and he has been reconciled with

the college, as an honorary fellow—but he's no nearer the chapel.

I wonder if it's because his own revolution has such frightening potentialities for disaster, that he instinctively recoils from an even greater one: the Christian one. They've taken his "golden molecules" and learned how to engineer and splice them in fantastic ways that could change the shape of all life as we know it, combining genetic material from one organism with another as different as plant and mammal—my unscientific imagination immediately suggested whale and poison ivy, conjuring up visions of monsters to come. But scientists are worried, too. "It's the biggest break with nature that has occurred in human history," warns one Nobel prize winner, George Wald, and he argues against turning the terrors of this revolution loose in the world.* He's too late. They say that even a bright high school student can try his hand at gene-splicing.

Perhaps Francis Crick, brilliant founder of one revolution, senses a disturbing rival in the demands of another—a revolution that calls for commitment not to the blind, faceless forces of his golden molecules, but to the small, warm light of "faith as a grain of mustard seed." Make no mistake about it: the Christian inside-out revolution may not turn the world upside down with quite the satisfying thump of a mortar barrage, or the impersonal precision of a bio-chemical experiment, but there is a pent-up, penetrating power in it that can change the world more significantly than DNA. It works curiously like DNA, however. It doesn't burn the system, it enters it. It doesn't accept the

system, it changes it. Nor does it withdraw from the system in utopian despair. Christianity splices in and begins its changing work inside.

Take as an example the role that the Christian faith, particularly Protestantism, has played in the whole national life of Korea. When the first Protestant missionaries came, beginning in 1884, their gospel was a simple gospel and their preaching was straight from the Bible. But because their missionary concern was as broad and as wide as the needs of the people, the transforming effect was explosive. Some of the first criticisms, in fact, of the Protestant pioneers centered around their interest in other than strictly religious matters. When Underwood imported kerosene and agricultural implements, and Moffett organized a timber concession on the Yalu, and Adams and Swallen brought in Korea's first apple trees, Western commercial traders protested. "That's not the business of missionaries," they cried. "It's unfair of them to use their intimate knowledge of Korea for commercial enterprises." And it galled them all the more to know that the missionaries were doing it not for personal gain but to teach the Koreans how to compete on more equal terms against outside exploitation. Almost without realizing it Christians were thus caught up in an economic revolution in Korea. They were even more active in the intellectual revolution, and nowhere more radically than in the field of education for women. Mrs. Namsa Hahn Kim came at night to call on the missionary. She set her little lantern in front of Miss Frey, and blew out the candle. "My life is like that, dark

* Quoted by G. F. Will in *The Herald Tribune*, International Edition, March 18-19, 1977.

as night," she said. "Won't you give me a chance to find light." It was the Christian answer to this plea that gave Korea's women that chance. The first schools for girls in the whole country were Christian schools, and women's role in Korean society has never been the same since—a transforming ferment that revolutionized everything from family relationships to public health. Perhaps the contribution that has most endeared Christians to the Korean people has been their part in Korea's struggle for justice and independence. Kiel Sun-Ju, the great Presbyterian evangelist, used to tell of how he learned about democracy through long talks with a missionary as together, about 1901, they began to plan a constitution for a self-governing, independent Korean Presbyterian Church. He became so enthusiastic a convert to the concept of representative rule that he declared "Democracy must not be limited to the church and the nation. We must begin with the Christian family." He shocked his neighbors—even the Christians among them—by telling his sons they would be free to marry girls of their own choice. Family problems were to be settled in a free and democratic way. When, for example, he found that his son's pigeons were spoiling the roof, he called a family council. "The pigeons must go," he announced, "Let us vote." And to his intense surprise and annoyance, the sons voted against him. But the canny old evangelist knew his human nature as well as his democracy. He came the next day to the youngest son. "Wouldn't you rather have a deer than pigeons?" he asked. And at the next vote, with that son at least happily on his side, the pigeons went. He carried the same practical wisdom and

intense convictions about fair play, representation, and liberty into Korea's struggle for independence from Japanese colonialism and became famous when he was sent to prison as leader of the Christian signers of Korea's Declaration of Independence in the massive, non-violent demonstrations of 1919. He was Korea's John Witherspoon.

But the old patriot, Pastor Kiel, would have protested had you suggested that leadership of an independence movement was his great contribution to Korea. The love of his life was evangelism. It was he who had led the great Korean Revival that swept like fire through the peninsula from 1903 to 1907 and touched off such an intense and massive ingathering of believers that in five short years church membership increased four-fold. As Koreans said afterwards to the missionaries, "Some of you go back to John Calvin, and some of you to John Wesley, but we can go back no further than 1907 when we first really knew the Lord Jesus Christ." That's when the change started, Pastor Kiel would assert. That's when the power came. I still don't know any better way to change a nation than to change its people. Begin inside.

III. *Inside and Out*

Even the geographical pattern of the Christian mission is "the world inside out." "Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and away to the ends of the earth." The circles are concentric. Not from the top down. That's paternalism, and bureaucracy. And not from the outside in. The world does not "write the agenda." The Christian thrust comes from inside.

We missionaries with our eyes on the ends of the earth often give the impression, I am afraid, that we minimize

the importance of the center. We tend to suggest that the quicker a Christian leaves America for the "uttermost parts" the better, and that if we must return from time to time it should be only to tell you what you are doing wrong and how much better we are doing it out there. If so, I apologize.

In an "inside out" revolution the fire at the center is crucially important, and if that fire goes out the whole Christian world suffers. There is no substitute for the unity of the whole church in a whole mission to the whole world.

I may be wrong, but I have long suspected that one reason for the failure of Christianity in Asia in the first thousand years—it almost disappeared in the tenth century—was that the growing edge became cut off from the center. This didn't happen in the West (except with the Celtic church, and there's a lesson to be learned there, too). But from the beginning there was this difference between outreach east and outreach west: Paul, in the West, came back again and again to Jerusalem, but not Thomas in the East. Thomas disappeared into Asia and never came back. Even after Jerusalem fell, the center (or centers) of Christendom never lost touch with the missionary expansion west. But Asia was left out—cut off first at the Roman-Persian border by the 600-year smouldering war between those two giants. Cut off, too, by schism: first the Nestorian, then the Monophysite controversies that broke Christian Asia and Christian Africa away from the center. And then the double cut-off—the Mohammedan conquest. The Arabs swirled up out of the desert and separated the church in outer Asia (China) from its Asian center in

Persia, which had already been cut off from the west.

This may help to explain one of the mysteries of Asian church history: why did the Nestorians so completely disappear in China? They had blazed a missionary trail from Persia 7,000 miles across the high heart of the world in Central Asia. Beginning in the fourth and fifth centuries, in one of the most perilous and successful missionary ventures of all time they had carried the gospel along the old Silk Road from Edessa and Arbela into Afghanistan. They pushed over the Hindu Kush and up along the Mountains of Heaven where the lowest passes are 14,000 feet high and trees explode in the cold. They skirted the Taklamakan Desert, that most isolated spot on earth where China now shrouds in secrecy its work on atomic warfare. In the year 635 those Persian missionaries reached Chang'an, capital of Tang Dynasty China and one of the four largest cities of the world (along with Constantinople, Baghdad, and Kungju, Korea). At Chang'an the Chinese Emperor received the missionaries with unexpected courtesy; unexpected because he had just been persecuting Buddhists as unwanted foreign intruders from India. But he had melted, and he was in the midst of building up the world's greatest library at Chang'an. When he found out that the Persians were scholars preaching a religion of "the Book," he was so impressed he gave them study space in his library. He told them to translate their sacred books into Chinese. With an open door before them the missionaries set to work, the faith grew and the church spread. The Nestorian Monument tells us that by the 8th century there were missionary monasteries in all the pre-

fectures of China. Even if that is a pious exaggeration—it would mean 358 major Christian centers in 8th century. There is no question but that those were golden years for the church in China. That was 1,200 years ago. Then, as suddenly, it disappeared. In the year 987 an Arab historian wrote:

"Behind the church in the Christian quarter (of Baghdad) I fell in with a certain monk . . . who seven years before had been sent to China by the Patriarch with five other churchmen . . . I asked him about his travels and he told me that Christianity had become extinct in China. The Christians had perished in various ways. Their Church had been destroyed. And there remained not one Christian in China."

(Abulfaraq, quoted by J. Foster, *The Church of the Tang Dynasty*, p. 115)

What had happened? Well many things—the fall of a friendly dynasty, the watering down of the faith as it interacted with other religions—but also (and I think this is important) the cutting off of the growing edge of the church from the center. The Persian missionaries reached China in A.D. 635. Less than ten years later the capital of the Persian empire and the center of the Nestorian church fell to the Muslims. The consequences to the church are sometimes exaggerated. It was the Zoroastrians, not the Christians, who were wiped out. Zoroastrianism was the Persian national religion and therefore anathema to the conquerors, but Christianity was a minority religion and was given lenient treatment as a possible ally against rebellious Persian nationalism.

Evangelism, however, was forbidden. There were to be no more conversions outside the Christian community.

Faced with the choice of evangelism or survival, the Nestorians chose survival. But what survived was no longer a living church; it was a Christian ghetto. They had given up their outreach—the evangelistic, missionary lifeline which is the only part of the Christian revolution that insures survival. So they withered away. Not just at the center, in Persia. In China, out at the edge, the church completely disappeared and it was centuries before it returned under the Mongols.

It may be an over-generalization, but I think it is true that when the center gives up its mission, and the edge loses touch with the center, as happened in Asia between the 8th and 10th centuries, both the center and the edge weaken and wither. This is one reason why I refuse to accept the tempting slogan, "The day of the western missionary is over." It is true that "the great new fact" of our day is the rise of the younger churches. But there is both a theological and historical necessity to a continuing western presence in mission. The wholeness of the household of God demands it.

For older, tired churches like ours this means that we cannot happily turn over the world to the younger church and get back to our own pressing problems. There is a primary and basic responsibility of the whole church that not even the exhilarating rise of the younger church and the growth of third-world missions can make obsolete. Buying our way out by supporting someone else's missionaries is no Christian answer either. You can't do missions by proxy, though that does seem to be the direc-

tion in which we are heading. In 1966 we United Presbyterians had 1,082 overseas missionaries. Ten years later in 1976 we were down to 402, and of these only 29 were under 40 years of age. By 1982, without new blood, we will have only 169 overseas missionaries left, and this at a time when the world's Christians aren't even keeping up with the population growth. By the year 2000 there will be more non-Christians in the world than there are *people* in the world today (4 billion 600 million non-Christians in 2000 by present trends; 4 billion people altogether today). This is no time to go Nestorian and sink back into our plush but shrinking Christian ghetto, thinking "Small is beautiful."

There is a corollary warning in this for the younger churches, too. When the growing edge loses touch with the center, both suffer. The center can turn into a ghetto, but so can the edge. It can become a cluster of racist, nationalist ghettos sprinkled forlornly through the vast, peopled reaches of the third world. Asia, with over half of all the people in the world, is only three per cent Christian. Cut off the weaker clusters there and they will probably simply die like the Nestorians from evangelistic or theological or ethical malnutrition. But even the strong younger churches today need the balance of a living, working relationship outside themselves. Today some voices are suggesting a moratorium on missionaries. This is not unreasonable sometimes; particularly where an insecure younger church needs short-term space to grow and breathe. But as long-term policy it leads straight down into what Bishop Stephen Neill has called "the snake-pit of ecclesiastical nationalism." We will end up, if we are not careful, with one

Christian ghetto talking to another only at long distance, through ecumenical embassies and international councils. Even after the Asian cut-off Nestorian bishops sometimes accompanied Arab embassies to China, but the working partnership was gone, and it is that working partnership—not ecumenical relations—that is so vital to mission. I will always remember Dr. Mackay insisting that "Ecumenics is unity *and* mission." Take away mission and it is no longer ecumenics. The edge and the center need each other in mission, or they both wither.

But which is the edge and which is the center, I am no longer sure. I have been speaking with typical arrogance as if the center is here in the west, and as if the rest of the world is the outside edge. In a sense, I suppose, we all have to begin where we are. And geographically and numerically the weight of balance is still in the west. But to call ourselves the center and to brush the rest of the world off to the fringe is not only one-sided history, it is theologically absurd.

How provincially we remember our church history. We begin in the east—what else can we do with Bethlehem and Jerusalem and Antioch? But as quickly as is decent we escape with Paul from Asia through Philippi into Europe. And once there we never look back. Constantine is the first Christian king. Rome the center. The first missionaries convert northern Europe. Then, becoming even more provincial, we turn Protestant and purified by Luther and Calvin we move on to Plymouth Rock from whence, 1,800 years after Christ, we bring our belated western blessings to Asia, Africa and the islands of the sea.

That is a caricature, of course. We were never taught like that at Princeton. But when modern Christendom forgot its Asian roots, it created for itself one of the most unnecessary obstacles it has ever had to contend with in world mission; namely, the image of Christianity as a foreign, western import. Christianity is not western. It began where Asia meets Africa. The importation was in the other direction, into Europe. The first missionaries were from Asia, and our western ancestors were their converts, or their converts' converts. The first Christian king was Asian. Not Constantine. Possibly Gundaphar of India (if you like tradition), or Abgar of Osroene who ruled a border kingdom east of the Euphrates a hundred years before Constantine. The first church building of record was in Asia and the first Christian hospital. There were more martyrs ripped apart and flayed alive in Persia than all the Christians killed in all the persecutions of the Roman empire.

What may be more to the point, just as the church was not western there at the beginning, neither is it western today. The balance is shifting back. How many members, for example, did we United Presbyterians lose last year? By contrast our sister Presbyterian church in Korea added 200 whole new congregations in 1976. I hear that some Amer-

ican seminaries have been closing. But there are 500 theological schools spreading and growing in an arc along the rim of Asia from Japan to India. The fastest growing churches in the world may actually be in Latin America, or perhaps Africa, where Christians are multiplying so rapidly that we will soon no longer have to be embarrassed by the white face that Christianity now seems to show to the world. In not so many more decades that face will be more dark than white.

But in the deepest sense, that is all beside the point. The world is still looking in a glass darkly if it sees either white or dark in the face of the Christian church. The face it ought to see is neither yours nor mine, but Christ's. And the whole point of turning the world inside out is not to change the center from west to east or north to south. What we are sent to do is to call the world to a new center, the true center, Jesus Christ. For most revolutions turn to ashes, but this one burns from the inside out, and when we let it burn purely through His body, the Church, it burns and is not consumed. As an old hymn put it simply, long ago:

"How soon men forge again
The fetters of their past.
As long as Jesus lives in us,
So long our freedoms last."

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